

THE VALUE OF POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT

Your association's role in local politics

By Andrew S. Goodrich

Politics is always an interesting game. It can be gut wrenching, but always interesting. We need only look to our own recent national election to see the process at its best (or worst).

The reality is that, as a local police (or sheriff's) association, our ability to influence national, or even statewide elections is minimal to non-existent. However, there are numerous opportunities to influence those elections that are closer to home, namely elections for city council and county supervisor.

I will put in the punch line here, at the beginning of the story, in the hopes that after reading it, you'll want to read on. In the past two city council elections in our town, we have actively endorsed five candidates for office. This includes a candidate who was running against a two-time incumbent. We are batting 1,000; all five candidates (including the one running against the incumbent) have been elected to office.

Now, back to the story about a medium-sized association in a conservative Orange County city that had a great political awakening starting in that very notorious last election year. Fullerton is by most measurements a medium or greater sized city and agency. With a population of about 122,000, and a police department of 150 sworn officers, it would be in the top 200 largest agencies in the nation.

However, Fullerton is overshadowed by Los Angeles, Anaheim, Santa Ana, and a host of smaller agencies. Just a stone's throw north of Disneyland, Fullerton is a very conservative community, with a conservative city council and leadership history.

For years, this conservative element dominated city politics, including the way in which elections were run and candidates chosen. Like most of our government, incumbents rarely (if ever) lost contested elections.

Meanwhile, the men and women of the Fullerton Police Officers' Association (FPOA) saw their salaries dwindle when compared to neighboring agencies. While still not being underpaid, there was significant disparity between very similar agencies. In addition, equipment and working conditions were also on the decline.

Fullerton is one of two local agencies in all of Orange County without working computers in the patrol units, and the police station is a relic held over from before World War II as a Public Works Administration effort.

On the other hand, the community is extremely supportive of the police department and its

officers. Fullerton PD is a very high-service department, handling calls that many other cities would balk at.

The FPOA was like most smaller associations, who did little other than give away money to a few local causes and pay for legal representation for the members. A Political Action Committee (PAC) was started around 1994 in a well-intentioned effort to have a voice in local affairs. However, the PAC did little other than offer token endorsements to candidates, and offered no real support or clout.

There were rumblings among many of the members to step-up association activities, and take a more activist approach to everything from negotiations to political campaigns. There was an election for the 1999 presidency of the FPOA between a moderate former vice-president, and a more radical (and younger) officer. The moderate candidate won by a margin of one vote. There was a rematch for 2000, and this time, the "radical" won with about 70 percent of the vote.

When our new president came into office, he had a broad goal of making the FPOA a more viable employee association, attempting to have a voice in city affairs through an active campaign for political candidates. He and I spoke at length on how to accomplish these goals, and devised a strategy that worked for us. The agenda we ended up with was influenced by a variety of sources, including information we had taken from other local associations who were already politically active, strategies from a police union seminar, and our own ideas.

I cannot overemphasize the importance of leadership. Many of the people who were involved all year long were the same people that had been involved in the past, but hadn't had the direction or will to do what we wanted and needed to do.

This is not a "knock" on our previous presidents, just a difference of direction and devotion. A core circle of leaders is needed who are willing to make the tough decisions, in spite of the inevitable consequences that result when authority is challenged. Without this core, the effort would have been a disastrous failure.

Another factor to consider is the political backlash. There will be many in your city or county leadership who do not want you to be politically active. "They" have had things their way for years and years, and "they" do not want a group with the credibility that you have usurping "their" program. We felt a lot of pressure from the local newspaper, various leaders and administrators during our first real election cycle in 2000.

One of our first tasks was to review the candidates that the previous board had endorsed for the 2000 primary. These endorsements were made at the end of 1999, and we wanted to make sure that they reflected our changed attitude.

One of these candidates was our own city councilman, who was running in a hotly contested primary for a state Senate seat. There was talk about whether to pull the endorsement because of perceived past grievances. What followed was heated debate between all of the board

members, who were almost evenly split.

One of the hardest things that police officers acting as board members must do is divorce themselves from many of our natural instincts. Politics isn't like friendships, or even working relationships. Politics is business, and seldom black and white. There are not simply good guys and bad guys, with no middle ground. The political arena is almost completely gray.

In the end, we decided to keep the endorsement in place, but only after making our concerns very clear to the candidate. He still had our support, and we demonstrated our serious intentions. We have gone on to develop a good working relationship with this candidate.

I should address here the whole idea of a police association supporting any candidates for office. Many of our rank and file wrestled with the idea of whether it was appropriate for us as an association to "sully ourselves" in local politics. It took a great deal of education and debate, but the vast majority was convinced.

Law enforcement has always had an interest in politics. Whether it's the "Three Strikes" law, legislation allowing maliciously accused officers to sue their accusers, or 3%@50 retirement, law enforcement has a definite interest in law and politics.

When it comes to local politics in a city of our size, an organization such as ours is one of the few groups citizens feel they can trust. So it is not only our own self-interest that we are looking after, but also the health and well-being of our community.

We developed our position in the community by donating \$15,000 per year to local groups, individuals and charities. This includes a small scholarship program that we began in 2001, where we give six local high school seniors \$500 toward their next year's college tuition. Politics is all about money. In order to be effective, a "war chest" was needed. Our president made the rounds of the PD, and personally spoke with every member. Our PAC membership went from about 50 to 98 percent.

Next, we decided to admit our own frailty and limitations as we ventured into this unknown territory. We were all cops, moonlighting as board members and political activists. It was decided we would hire an experienced political consultant to help and advise us along this complicated path.

We realized that it would cost about \$15,000 to hire a consultant, but the board was determined to do this the right way, and the expenditure was approved. It seems as if many associations decide to "go it alone," hoping to save money.

Having an experienced consultant on staff was invaluable. He assisted with strategy, legal questions, and interviews with candidates, developing mail pieces, and analysis. Convincing our membership that this was a necessary expense was well worth the effort. I cannot overstate the need to have a good political consultant on board your program to run an effective campaign.

The next thing we did was to interview all of the candidates who would come to see us. We asked the tough questions, and chose to endorse one candidate who was a sitting councilmember, and a second who was a complete newcomer. We took a big risk, and chose not to endorse our sitting mayor.

We sent out several professionally produced mailers, including absentee ballot applications. These mailers included one which had several of our members standing together, with pictures of our candidates superimposed over us, and the phrase, "We stand behind Clesceri and Norby for City Council".

Lastly, we did something very unusual for a police association. We walked precincts. Our consultant produced "precinct walk kits" for each member to take with him/her on the walk. We only spent our time speaking with high potential voters, and targeted the districts to maximize our effectiveness.

Our candidates came out with us, talking to the members and the citizens. The result was an average of a plus-20 percent vote for our candidates in the precincts where we walked.

We told our members that one four-hour block, every two years, wasn't too much to ask for, and most agreed. We had a high participation level that paid off on Election Day.

The results on Election Day were that both of our candidates won. But of course, our lingering question was, "Was this a fluke, or were we genuinely effective in our campaign?"

Much too quickly, 2002 arrived and the process was started again. In the interim two years, we raised our PAC dues to \$5 per pay period (every two weeks). This earns our PAC about \$33,000 every election cycle, which is the minimum we need to be successful. Our dues had been \$2.50, but this was not sufficient for the election program that we wanted to run.

In 2002, we partnered up with our firefighter association in support of three candidates. Partnering with the Fullerton Firefighters Association (FFA) allowed us to pool our resources and produce a more effective campaign. One of these candidates was a long-time councilmember. The other two were newcomers, and one of these newcomers was running against a sitting incumbent.

This was a big risk for us. Do we risk alienating an incumbent that has a very good chance of winning? With the advice of our consultant (who we called back to help us again), we believed that she could be beaten. The other newcomer was running for an open seat, but against a candidate that had been the favorite, and had many other local endorsements.

Once again, we put up signs ("Your Police & Fire support Nelson, Bankhead, Wilson for City Council"), sent out mailers, and walked precincts.

Election Day came and went, and when the votes were counted, all three of the candidates who

we supported had won. We were most surprised (pleasantly) that our newcomer had beaten the two-term incumbent. We felt pretty confident that our question on the day after Election Day 2000 was answered. "It wasn't a fluke, and we were genuinely effective!"

What have we gained from all of this? We are now on very friendly terms with our council members. We know them, and they know us. We have the ability to call on one of them, and talk about our point of view and our concerns to a willing listener. This is all that anyone can ask.

And as elections go, we'll be at it again in 2004. We ask all of our members to contribute to the PAC, and we ask every member to contribute in some way each election cycle. This can be putting up signs, or walking precincts.

This is not an easy road to navigate. It takes leadership, determination and resources. However, the reward can be significant, especially if your city/county has ignored your voices for too long. Meanwhile, during the past two years, we have been in the process of constructing a new police department building, and are awaiting final software implementation for our patrol unit computers.

All in all, I'd have to say it wasn't a fluke after all.

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